

# COUNTERTERRORISM, CENTRAL ASIAN STYLE

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**T**his spring, two upheavals profoundly altered the political landscape of Central Asia. The first was the so-called “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan, which swept post-Soviet strongman Askar Akaev from power in Bishkek. The second was the outbreak of violent revolts in Uzbekistan that, as of this writing, threaten to destabilize the government of Islam Karimov in Tashkent.

Though different in location and—as yet—in their intensity, these developments share some striking similarities. Both were fueled by popular discontent with the ruling government. In both, largely unnoticed by the international media, radical Islamist organizations succeeded in harnessing that discontent against the respective governments. And, in both instances, the regimes in question were major partners in the U.S.-led War on Terror.

Yet the recent unrest in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is only the latest manifestation in what has by now become a pervasive and recognized problem in the former Soviet Union: the manipulation of regional conflicts by radical Islamic elements. Less well understood, however, is how Central Asian governments are confronting this threat—and making progress in the fight for Muslim hearts and minds.

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## **Saudi subversion**

Radical Islam boasts a long and checkered history in post-Soviet Central Asia. Its roots stretch back to the days after the fall of USSR, when a number of former communist leaders gravitated to Muslim theology and Islamic discourse. Their ideological about-face was by and large tactical; these former Marxists were hardly true believers. Rather, most opted to abandon Soviet dogma and embrace Islamic revivalism as a pragmatic way of staying in power.

The results were profound. To bur-nish their credentials as champions of Islam, local leaders opened their doors to Saudi-sponsored Wahhabi Islam. Riyadh, for its part, took advantage of the invitation, expanding its financial and political foothold in the “post-Soviet space.” Thus, in the early 1990s, Saudi influence came to the newly independent states of Central Asia in the form of new mosques and religious education.

“By the end of the Soviet era the number of local clergy had shrunk, while the demand for them across Russia and Eurasia was mushrooming,” explains Central Asia scholar Zeyno Baran. “To meet the demand, Central Asian Muslims had to rely on foreign imams and religious texts. Funded by petrodollars and inspired by a radical ideology, outside Islamists filled the vacuum with their own radical religious interpretations, flooded the mosques and religious institutes and discredited those imams who practiced the traditional, Central Asian form of Islam. Most of the people did not see any difference; they wanted to learn about Islam and accepted any group that declared it was teaching their religion.”<sup>1</sup>

The scope of Saudi outreach was staggering. Shamshibek Shakirovich Zakirov, a veteran Kyrgyz expert on religious affairs, estimates that after 1990, ten new mosques were constructed with the help of Saudi Arabia in the

Kyrgyz city of Osh alone.<sup>2</sup> The Saudi effort, Zakirov says, also included the provision of Wahhabi literature in local languages for these new mosques.<sup>3</sup> This entrenchment of influence was replicated many times over in other corners of the former Soviet Union.

Though initially appreciative of Saudi largesse, local leaders quickly felt its destabilizing potential. Saudi money and educational materials were intended to promote the Kingdom’s intolerant, puritan strain of Islam, which encouraged opposition forces to support the creation of an Islamic Caliphate, rather than reinforcing the rule of local post-Soviet governments. By the early 1990s, according to an official Kyrgyz government assessment, the “numbers of illegal private religious schools [had] increased... and their contacts with foreign (Saudi) Muslim organizations expanded. As a result of such contacts not only the functioning character of these centers, but also their ideology, changed. Those schools of traditional Islamic education turned into independent radical religious centers, the programs of which, except for training, included the propagation of their own social and political views.”<sup>4</sup>

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With democracy promotion now a key strategic objective, official Washington understandably does not wish to condone or ignore the draconian police measures employed by some of its Coalition partners. Neither, however, should it wish to undermine these governments in their struggle against radical Islam, which is even less likely to adhere to Western values.

The impact on civil society in Central Asia was pronounced. As experts have noted, the question was not one of “a trivial reshuffling of power, but rather a truly radical revolution” in which Wahhabi ideology confronted national secular elites. “National intelligentsia would undoubtedly fall prey to radical Islamization of public life. Secular, atheistic and ‘Europeanized’ elite would be unable to fit into an Islamic model of development. Iranian and Afghan examples leave no room for illusions.”<sup>5</sup>

These fears were made all the more acute by the strategy employed by Central Asian Islamic radicals. At home, these elements challenged the new “Islamic” ideology of local ruling elites and threatened their positions of power by encouraging Muslim clergy and members of fundamentalist groups to assume state power. Even more ominously, regional experts say that these forces also became active recruitment organs, seducing hundreds of young Central Asians to venture abroad to study at Islamic educational institutions in nations throughout the Muslim world, often with the active support of radicals in those countries.<sup>6</sup>

The destabilizing nature of these activities goes a long way toward explaining why, time and again, Central Asian scholars, intellectuals and activists have tended to support local leaders, “whenever fundamentalist Islam reared its head.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, they have formulated a remarkably complex response to the inroads made by Islamic radicals, harnessing religious texts, state education, and public diplomacy in an effort to offer an alternative to the Wahhabi worldview.

## Lessons from the Central Asian front

Today, it would be fair to say that the United States and the states of Central Asia share a common enemy: Wah-

habi Islam. American policymakers can learn valuable lessons for their “war of ideas” from Central Asian religious leaders, academics and governmental officials, who have been fighting Wahhabism and waging the battle for Muslim hearts and minds since the collapse of the USSR. Their practical experience in several key areas can be brought to bear in the larger struggle with radical Islam now taking place throughout the Muslim world.

**Ideology.** Among the majority-Muslim states of Central Asia, the dominant branch of Sunni Islam is the Khanafi school—one of the most tolerant and liberal in that religion. Its pluralistic and largely apolitical disposition is one of the main reasons that Khanafi believers survived and avoided mass repression during the Communist era, when Soviet ideologues sought to eliminate doctrinal competition with Marxism-Leninism.

**Knowledge Base.** Since gaining independence, the Central Asian states have managed to educate considerable numbers of knowledgeable experts in Islam. In these countries, the Koran and *Hadith* have been translated into local languages, and many academics and *imams* are applying their knowledge on a practical level.

**Ambivalence about America.** Anti-Americanism among the Central Asian states is much more muted than in other Muslim countries, and for good reason. For the 70-odd years of Communist rule in Central Asia, Soviet Muslims were isolated from the outside Islamic world. “Being Muslim,” in turn, became a tool of self-identification for the peoples of Central Asia; a niche to escape from totalitarian communist ideological control. Younger generations consequently have had no chance to see negative examples of Ameri-

can behavior in their countries, and they respect American achievements in technology, business, and the arts. And, since local Muslims do not identify themselves with a greater Muslim *ummah* (world community), they have broken with their counterparts in the Middle East and generally supported American actions in Afghanistan and ongoing Coalition operations in Iraq.

**Education.** By necessity, Central Asian governments, especially those in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, have created and developed an extensive educational system—spanning from kindergarten to university—that inculcates the moral norms and social principles of tolerant Islam, and which respects the value of human life (be it Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or other). The system provides textbooks for schools, cartoons for children, education for *imams* of local mosques, a network of counselors in Islamic affairs for central and local administrations, and television and radio talk shows that challenge the intolerant Wahhabi interpretation of the Koran and *Hadith* and provide listeners with a religious alternative. (Indeed, it can be argued that the lack of sufficient governmental funds to support tolerant *imams*, to publish the textbooks of moderate Islamic clerics, or to provide them with the necessary airtime to deliver their sermons to receptive audiences, are the primary reasons why Central Asian governments have so far not achieved a decisive victory in their fight against radical Islam.)

These realities have bred a cadre of Central Asian scholars and religious authorities that are ready and able to confront radical Islam. Dr. Abdujabar Abduvakhitov, the rector of the Westminster International University in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, is one such official. According to him, the mission of

state educational establishments should be to erode the base of “supporters” of Wahhabism, and to educate young Muslims in the spirit of tolerant, traditional Central Asian Islam.<sup>8</sup> Other experts have echoed these prescriptions. Dr. Zukhriddin Khusnidinov, rector of the Islamic University of Uzbekistan, believes that university activities—as well as radio and TV broadcasting—are necessary in order to provide young people with a proper understanding of Islamic principles.<sup>9</sup>

Asanov Avazbek of the Osh State University in Kyrgyzstan agrees. According to him, traditional law enforcement measures are ineffective against Wahhabi propaganda. Rather, according to Asanov, opponents need the “help of other ideology,” and of public outreach. “For example,” Asanov says, “it not difficult ideologically to prove, that the Wahhabi goal of creating a Caliphate in Central Asia is not a real one. One simply has to put in plain terms for ordinary people.”<sup>10</sup>

And some, like Abdukhafiz Abdudjabarov of the Tashkent Islamic University, are doing just that, articulating a bold critique of Wahhabi radicalism in public sermons and pronouncements:

How can a person claim to be a Muslim, while violating the main precept of Islam, acting contrary to the ideas enshrined in the main document of the religion of Islam? How can he claim that he serves the true religion if he goes against the Holy Koran and Blessed Hadiths of the Prophet? It is known that the Holy Koran is the only law we obey in our deeds and actions and it prohibits killing...

...a person who kills people without having reasons for it will be condemned to hell. How can such a person claim to be serving the religion of Islam? And how can he claim to be serving humanity’s interests?<sup>11</sup>

## Human rights, or counterterrorism?


In their fight against radical Islam, Uzbekistan and other Central Asian governments have often undertaken tough administrative measures—steps which have deviated from Western standards of human rights. For this, they have received public admonitions from the U.S. Department of State, and loud condemnation from international bodies such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

As justified as these criticisms are, some perspective is in order. It has become something of a truism that truly democratic regimes are hard to find in the Muslim world, even among allies of the United States. Not much has changed since September 11th; a 2005 survey conducted by Freedom House notes that just ten of the world's 47 Muslim-majority countries—less than a quarter—are electoral democracies.<sup>12</sup>

Without a doubt, this dichotomy poses a profound dilemma for the United States. With democracy promotion now a key strategic objective, official Washington understandably does not wish to condone or ignore the draconian police measures employed by some of its Coalition partners—measures that often violate individual rights and liberties. Neither, however, should it wish to undermine these governments in their struggle against radical Islam, which is even less likely to adhere to Western values.

Another problem is present as well. Well-educated at home and indoctrinated by Wahhabi tutors abroad, Central Asian radicals may become valuable foot soldiers in the terror *internationale*. Asian in appearance, they can easily escape the “Arab profiling” that is quietly being undertaken by American security agencies, and are capable

of blending into Chinese, Korean or Vietnamese communities, either in the United States or in Asia. These constituencies, if left unengaged, could be seduced by radical Islamic ideology, much to the detriment of the security of the United States and its allies.

American policymakers are now struggling to strike the proper balance between democracy and security in the “post-Soviet space.” It would be a tragedy, however, if in their efforts, officials in Washington were to ignore the important steps that have been taken by regional regimes to de-legitimize radical Islamic ideology, to limit its political influence, and to win the hearts and minds of local Muslims. They are lessons worth learning. 

1. Zeyno Baran, *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency* (Washington, DC: The Nixon Center, 2004), 71.
2. Author's interview with Shamshibek Shakirovich Zakirov, Osh, Kyrgyzstan, August 2004.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Islam in Kyrgyzstan: Tendencies of Development*, Official Report of the State Commission on Religious Affairs (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan: Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2004), 35.
5. Roald Sagdeev and Susan Eisenhower, eds., *Central Asia: Conflict, Resolution, and Change* (Washington, DC: The Eisenhower Institute, 1995), 175.
6. Author's interview with Shamshibek Shakirovich Zakirov.
7. Sagdeev and Eisenhower, *Central Asia: Conflict, Resolution, and Change*, 175.
8. Author's interview with Abdujabar Abduvakhitov, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, July 2004.
9. Author's interview with Zukhriddin Khusnidinov, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, July 2004.
10. Author's interview with Asanov Avazbek, Osh, Kyrgyzstan, August 2004.
11. “On Terror and Terrorists,” (in Arabic), Sermon of Abdulkhafiz Abdudjabarov, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, August 2004. (Author's collection)
12. David R. Sands, “Finding Allies Within Islam: Muslim World Struggles With Concept of Democracy,” *Washington Times*, April 17, 2005, A01.